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ABSTRACT

Teachers confronted with the task of teaching or assessing listening skills should realize that competence in listening is acquired by knowing and doing and is evidenced by appropriate feedback or response. Various state curriculum and assessment projects have identified and grouped competencies in listening according to function, such as sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to the message. The lack of a conclusive definition of listening contributes to the difficulty in measuring listening skills. Nevertheless, standardized listening tests may serve a useful purpose in locating a strength or weakness in a student's listening. Context-generated paper and pencil tests can be used to ask questions about a discussion, rather than about a reading assignment. Other ideas for assessment include the evaluation of student journals, class notes, inference activities, vocabulary improvement, and logical thinking. Aside from written proof of active listening, a teacher can also make observations about student listening during class discussions about content material, perhaps keeping a check list concerning specific skills. Listening behavior can be observed, too, in the school environment outside of class. The measure for assessment may be varied, but there are many context-oriented opportunities for the classroom teacher to use to assess listening among students. (HOD)

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ASSESSING LISTENING SKILLS

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About four and one half years ago the Education Act of 1978 ammended the Education Act of 1965 to include oral communication as a basic skill. And then the fun began. Few people outside of the SCA had thought of oral communication as a basic skill and fewer still had thought of listening as a separate skill, teachable and measureable. State departments of education, legislatures, school districts and local schools were faced with implementing this mandate with little knowledge about the meaning of competency or skills in speaking, and less knowledge about competency or skills in listening. About this same time scholars in interpersonal communication began to explore ideas of "communication competence" in their search for answers to questions about human communication complexities. Simultaneously the general public became more vocal in demands for accountability within the elementary and secondary schools as a reaction toward higher school taxes and lower standardized test scores of graduates. Thus, we can see a general coming together of legislated mandates and scholarly curiosity regarding communication competence, and a demand for more strict assessment strategies in general.

Response to the mandate of the 1978 Act was pretty quick in coming, for the world of education, that is. States funded various educational attempts at listening curriculum design [1] and universities began to host workshops in basic skills and include speaking and listening for the first time. The first workshop and subsequent task force the University of Wisconsin System established in the basic skills was a little slow to include speaking and listening scholars, though, and a 53 page report of the task force in basic skills devoted five lines to speaking and listening . . . together. In 1979 I served as a consultant to the state of Minnesota advising representatives of all the school districts in aspects of instituting listening instruction and assessment. In 1980 the University of Wisconsin asked me to begin a three year project of writing a listening curriculum

K-12, followed by pilot studies and teacher preparation. The funds ran out after one year, but a sample of the curriculum is attached (see Appendix A.) The State of Wisconsin is including questions about speaking and listening concepts in its state-wide K-12 competency exam to be completed by 1985. Thus, efforts are being made to respond to that 1978 Act. These efforts may be uneven in scope and sequence, but the goal has been to bring the concepts of listening as a separate discipline to the fore, to bring curriculum ideas into the classroom, to release listening from its state as a communications orphan.

How does this help the K-12 classroom teacher? Dr. Lyman Steil, formerly of the University of Minnesota Department of Rhetoric, discovered in an eight year longitudinal study of teachers of Minnesota that teachers felt they could not teach listening because they did not know how, did not have materials, did not know concepts, did not have time, and did not know how to assess progress of students' listening. That study was completed about six years ago. As I travel about the state of Wisconsin giving workshops in listening to in-service groups and CESA groups, I find the same points being made. I believe that there is more material available than there was six years ago. One just has to look for it. A panel about teaching listening was featured at this convention yesterday. The International Listening Association was born in 1979 and functions to help teachers and others find materials. The bibliography at the end of this paper will provide some help in planning to integrate listening into the ordinary curriculum of the school day. Yet, it is the teacher who must comply with the legislated demands of school districts to teach and assess listening skills. It is the teacher who must find ways to help her/his class concentrate on the very act of listening.

No one doubts anymore that we listen more than we read or write or speak. No one doubts that we ask students to listen about 80% of the time

they are in the classroom. No one doubts that listening is the most used tool for learning. No one doubts that listening can be taught. But how can listening skills be assessed?

What is competence in listening?

Before discussing the assessment of listening skills I would like first to consider concepts of communication competency and their relationship to listening. Larson, et al in Assessing Functional Communication [2] have reviewed a variety of conceptions of competence in communication. Linguistic competence differs from communication competence, they say, in that the former stresses knowledge of one's language, whereas the latter, communication competence, focuses upon the relationship between people, not words. "Communication competence is tied to behavior, to the actual use of the communicative process by the individual." [3] McCroskey [4] argues that it is not enough to only demonstrate proper communication behavior by describing that behavior, but that it should actually be performed. He draws a distinction between competence (knowing about) and performing (actually doing it.) Spitzberg [5] developed a three component model of relational competence involving motivation, knowledge, and skill in communicative contexts. Allen and Brown [6] define communicative competence in terms of four principles: 1) a wide repertoire of experiences, 2) ability to select appropriate strategy from the retertoire, 3) the willingness to implement the strategy, and 4) the ability to evaluate the performance of behaviors. It is the position of this paper that listening competence employs both knowing and doing. Knowing about the listening process and its attendant processes of attention, concentration, and memory systems is important to carrying out effective listening, which demands selective attention, concentration strategies, and memory. Knowing that people have different purposes for commanding our attention helps a listener to respond appropriately to the intent of the message. Knowing the role of

the listener in the communicative process helps the effective listener to perform that role (i.e. knowing when and how to shut up) and knowing when an empathic role is demanded helps the listener to perform that role. Knowing one's own biases and those of a speaker will also help in judgement making on the part of the listener. Actually doing listening must also be a component of competence. Effective listening cannot be acquired by reading about it only as one may read history, for example. Effective, or competent, listening is a behavioral act, and like other behavioral acts, listening improves with practice. Moore [7] says that competence is "product bound." This seems particularly fitting to describe listening. The "product" of listening rests in the head of the listener. It is the conclusion drawn, or the fact heard, or the mood of the speaker guessed at, or the music appreciated. A listener must respond, however, for others to know what that "product" is and whether it is accurately interpreted. To the degree that the listener responds appropriately overtly or covertly, competence is assigned. Thus, it seems to me that competence in listening is acquired by knowing and doing, and is evidenced by appropriate feedback or response.

What skills comprise listening competence in the classroom?

If competence can be developed, what are the skills which comprise that competence? One should be able to infer one's listening competence by making judgements about those component skills. Identifying those skills which a listener needs in order to be judged competent may imply that listening is made up of an endless list of subskills. I do not believe that listening is a composite of subskills, all of which must be applied all of the time. I believe that the process of listening remains the same in the cortex, but the purposes to which we put our listening behavior differ. We may perceive that judgements are required of us as we listen to messages we call

persuasive. We perceive that some messages have as their purpose entertainment and call for less than critical responses. We perceive that someone is asking our help with a matter of personal decision-making. We realize that "listening from the other person's shoes" is necessary. We do all of these things because we have learned somewhere that our role of listener demands these differing responses from us. We do not listen differently. We weigh various aspects of each message differently, but the process of attending, concentrating, remembering, and cognitively structuring is the same.

A brief review of the listening skills selected by various authors of listening curricula [8] reveals a set of skills redundant among the authors. That is, authors have picked the same skills and have deemed them to be important skills to be mastered before listening competency is acquired. Does redundancy make a concept right? These same skills reappear because they represent what is sayable about listening behavior at present. These skills, when applied appropriately, seem to result in appropriate responses by a listener. Until the presence or absence of microsleeps is confirmed, until transcolossal inhibition and sex of listener is explored, and until more than one experiment has been done on simultaneous attention to stimuli, along with other advances in listening research, these skills are the best clues we have to predicting success in listening, that is, in providing appropriate responses to aural messages.

I have grouped the skills for convenience into four groups, after Steil's S.I.E.R. model. That is, S stands for sensing the message, I stands for interpreting the message, E stands for evaluating the message, and R stands for responding to the message. Thus, K-12 curricula contain the following skills:

Competencies of a sensing nature.

Skills:

purposeful attending
discerning between intended message and noise
concentrating
noting good listening behavior
attending to non-verbal stimuli
discriminating among sounds

Competencies of an interpreting nature: (assigning meaning)

Skills:

getting main points
discerning between literal and symbolic meaning
recognizing fact from fiction
vocabulary
organizing ideas in sequence (following directions)
recognizing relationships among speakers
conceptualizing
recognizing language of other cultures, statuses
recognizing difference between need and task fulfillment words

Competencies of an evaluative nature:

Skills:

noting purposes for listening
noting strategies of speaker
noting reasoning, arguments
recognizing difference between assumption and fact, opinion, inference
recognizing language of persuasion, information
drawing conclusions
assessing credibility of message
recognizing emotional self, barriers to listening

Competencies of responding:

Skills:

asking questions
giving appropriate feedback
withholding response until message ends
controlling emotions
responding in consonance with speaker/situation mood
withholding preparation of response until speaker has finished

The Illinois curriculum and the Wisconsin Alternative Curriculum Design have the added feature of the five functions espoused by SCA: informing, controlling, imagining, feeling, ritualizing. The above skills could be rearranged to apply to the functions.

Can listening be assessed?

There is no definitive definition of listening. This has lead some to say "if you can't define it you can't measure it." It is true that measuring listening is difficult and for several reasons: 1) standardized listening tests are said not to correlate well with each other, 2) tests may measure recall which although allied with listening may not be part of the listening process itself, 3) empathic listening is hard to measure so tests are biased. Listening may, indeed, be measured in tests, but all skills are not necessarily measured equally.

Rubin [9] has said:

> Communication performance is highly dependent on situational features. To the extent that assessment situations deviate from naturalistic situations . . . test scores will inadequately represent true communication skills. Yet few assessment schemes utilize data from naturalistic observation.

Does this mean that elementary and secondary teachers cannot and should not assess students' listening skills? No. It is certainly desireable to teach listening skills and useful to the student to have his progress charted. Educational benefits do accrue by learning listening skills and if students know that their progress with this learning tool is being monitored as is their progress with other tools such as reading, motivation may be instituted. If a pattern of error can be found within a student's listening behavior and thence corrected, assessment procedures will have been justified.

Kinds of assessment tools.

Published tests. In spite of shortcomings, "standardized" listening tests may serve a useful tool in locating a strength or weakness in a student's listening. This test may have its strength in measuring the skill of conclusion drawing: the S.T.E.P. test, or Sequential Tests of Educational Progress. [10] They go down to the first grade. The Stanford Achievement Test [11] contains

materials suitable for early elementary through upper elementary grades. Connectedness of items, following directions, and drawing conclusions are tested. The Brown-Carlsen Comprehensive Listening Test [12] does not apply to elementary school students. This test purports to test immediate recall, following directions, vocabulary, and sustained lecture. It is available through Communication Development, Inc. 25 Robb Farm Road, St. Paul MN. 55110. The Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test [13] is similar to the Brown-Carlsen, but has material aimed at the listener interpreting the mood of the speaker. This test is administered by tape. The Dow Listening Test [14] purports to test abilities to separate main point from subpoint. It is addressed to the upper grades and college. It is a difficult test in that it is quite long. It is administered by tape.

Paper and pencil tests. The listening of upper elementary and high school students can be tested frequently and quickly by use of paper and pencil tests. That is, right after class discussion about content items, the teacher could administer a short test, asking questions about the discussion, not the reading assignment. Questions could address several of the skills mentioned above. Listening tests integrated with regular class work would serve to alleviate one of the accusations that listening tests are isolated from reality. Since so much teaching is carried on orally, the sources of ideas for short tests are endless. Audio and video tapes, film strips, story time, map work, class discussions are all places for potential listening tests. Questions should refer to the orality presented and should not refer to the visual materials if listening is to be tested.

Other ideas for assessment are:

evaluation of student journals or listening logs
evaluation of class notes or lecture outlines
evaluation of inference activities
evaluation of vocabulary improvement
evaluation of logical thinking (of which listening is a part)

Class discussion. Aside from written proof of listening going on, a teacher can make observations about student listening during class discussions about content material, keeping a check list, perhaps, concerning specific skills. Redundant questioning by students could be noted, response to peer discussion, "butting in", hasty generalizing from little evidence, etc. could be noted. Small group work may afford the teacher observational opportunity to check appropriateness of responses by students to peers. Encouraging paraphrasing by students is a good tool for assessing listening. Encouraging "mirroring back," a Carl Rogers technique, shows students how misconceptions can arise in listening to another's opinion. The listener paraphrases the message back to the speaker before carrying on a disputation. Students can assess their own misinterprepations via this tool.

Informal observation. Student listening behavior may be observed in the school environment in as well as out of class. The teacher has the opportunity to observe and correct poor listening in interpersonal situations. If disputes arise and the teacher is called upon to be arbiter, the root of the matter may be traced to poor listening. Myriad such situations afford the opportunity for the teacher to assess listening skills and to teach listening on-the-spot. It is true that informal observation is so context oriented that it is impossible to "measure." But it is also true that informal situations cannot appear on listening tests and empathic skills are learned in informal settings.

A word needs to be addressed to the observation of non-verbal listening behavior. While we expect non-verbal behavior to accompany good listening, non-verbal posture of attention, good eye contact, etc., it is possible that non-verbal behavior is misleading. The student who stares out of the window may be demonstrating poor listening stance, but he still may be listening very well. It is the presence or absence of appropriate response

that is the assessment tool, not the eye.

I feel that listening can and should be taught. A teacher can teach listening skills and can administer standardized tests. Context generated paper and pencil tests and check lists can also provide a record for the teacher. Informal observation, while lease measureable, may be most important to the student as the relevance of listening is pointed out to him on-the-spot.

Listening is the most used communication act. Competence in listening can be acquired by learning about it and doing it. Measure for assessment may be varied, but there are many context oriented opportunities for the classroom teacher to assess listening. If correct response is a goal of good listening, and if specific skills produce a correct response in a listener, why cannot we foster and assess these skills in the classroom?

Endnotes

1. See for instance English Language Arts - Speaking and Listening K-12. The State Education Department of Elementary and Secondary Curriculum Development. Albany, NY. The Wisconsin Alternative Curriculum Design. The Wis. Dept. of Public Instruction. Project Signals, of Project Spoke, Norton, Mass. Mesa-Newport Listening Project. Mesa-Newport, Calif.

2. Carl Larson et al. Assessing Functional Communication. Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. Urbana, Ill. 1978. p. 16.

3. Ibid.

4. James McCroskey. "Communication Competence and Performance." Communication Education. Jan. 1982, pp. 2-4.

5. Brian Spitzberg. "Competence in Communicating." A paper presented at the 1981 SCA convention at Anaheim, California.

6. R.R. Allen and Kenneth Brown (Eds.) Developing Communication Competence in Children. National Textbook Co. 1976.

7. Michael Moore. "A Dynamic Vs a Static Perspective of Communication Competence." A paper presented at the 1981 SCA convention at Anaheim, California , p. 7

8. David Blocker, "Project Signals" for Massachusetts. Alice Ridge, "K-12 Listening Curriculum for Wisconsin." Robert Kellner, "The Wisconsin Alternative Curriculum Design" for the Department of Public Instruction of Wisconsin. W. Arthur Williams, "Basic Listening Skills" for the Illinois State Board of Education.

9. Donald Rubin, et al. "A Review and Critique of Procedures for Assessing Speaking and Listening Skills Among Preschool Through Grade Twelve Students." Communication Education. Oct. 1982, p. 299.

10. Sequential Tests in Educational Progress. Addison-Wesley, Mass.

11. Stanford Achievement Test. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York.

12. Brown-Carlsen Comprehensive Listening Test. Formerly published by Harcourt Brace. May soon be re-published by Telstar, St. Paul, MN.

13. Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test. Bob Bostrom. Univ. of KY.

14. The Dow Listening Test. % Terry Newton, St. Edward's College, Austin, TX.